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Allegiances

FernClan- those of the swamps

Leader: Mothstar
A dark grey she-cat with three white paws. She has long fur and whiskers.

Deputy: Lichenstone
A black tom with bright green eyes. He has a ring of grey around his muzzle.

Spirit Reader: N/A

Spirit Reader Apprentice: N/A

Warriors:

Mossbelly: A light grey tom with a white stomach.

Dawnspeckle: A brown she-cat with dark flecks on her pelt.
Apprentice: Newtpaw

Oakfur: A dark brown tabby tom with large brown eyes.

Fawnspeckle: A golden she-cat with tabby stripes and large white patches of fur.

Cloudpelt: A thin white tom with a long tail.

Moonshade: A black tom with one white paw.
Apprentice: Adderpaw

Wrentail: A brown tabby she-cat with distinct markings around her eyes and tail.
Apprentice: Toadpaw

Frogleap: a brown tabby tom with long legs.

Apprentices:

Newtpaw: an orange tom with amber eyes and a long, slender frame.

Toadpaw: a brown tabby she-cat with bright green eyes and a thin pelt.

Adderpaw: a bright red tom with a long tail and piercing eyes.

Queens:

Icestorm: a white she-cat with grey flecks.
Kits: Expecting

Elders:

Squirreltail: a bushy red retired queen. Her last litter was Adderpaw and Newtpaw.

Cedarbranch: a snappy brown she-cat with black tabby stripes.

NorthClan- those of the frost

Leader: Juniperstar
A white tom with a bushy orange tail. He is very large and has amber eyes.

Deputy: Arcticeye
A black tom with one bad eye that looks like a winter storm; clouded and pearly white.

StreamClan- those of the river

Leader: Lilystar
A white she-cat with grey patches of fur on her back and tail. She has unusual blue eyes and one black whisker.

Deputy: Amberfeather
A calico she-cat with long, tri colored fur. She has large amber eyes and an exotic beauty about her.

BoulderClan- those of the caverns

Leader: Cragstar
A brown tom with yellow eyes. His pelt is riddled with battle scars, and he has been in power for a long time.

Deputy: Batwing
A tall, thin, black tom, typically underestimated by his soft demeanor. He is vicious in battle, and wont refrain from maiming any opponent.

Prologue

The sounds of pitiful mewling could be heard throughout the silence of the camp, cutting through the morning mist to reach the ears of the gathering cats. Their heads bowed, they stopped outside of the nursery, trying to seem polite while also getting a glimpse of what had happened.

"What is of Fireflight?" Asked a timid young she-cat, looking to a larger white tom for answers.

The tom growled quietly and cuffed her over the ear, muttering for her to keep quiet. The apprentice obliged, shrinking to avoid the stares of her clanmates.

The muffled cries continued on for a minute or two, although it seemed like moons. Finally, a frail brown she-cat padded out of the den, her paws stained a dark red.

The cats waited, knowing enough not to shout out to the sullen warrior. "Fireflight has passed on," she called out, not letting her gaze rest on anyone in the clearing. "Her son is no more, although her daughter still breathes."

Shocked gasps came from the stunned cats, but the grim cat continued on with her speech. "We will need someone to nurse her," she said. "Is anyone expecting kits?"

Almost at once, a bright red tabby stepped out of the gathering, her eyes clouded with grief. "I am expecting my last litter, Cedarbranch," she stated firmly, sending a sad smile to her mate. "It would be a pleasure to raise Fireflight's only kin."

Cedarbranch nodded, disappearing into the briars for a second time, only to come out almost immediately with a brown scrap of fur. "Her name is Toadkit," she mumbled through the bundle. "And I believe that she will do something special for FernClan."

None of the cats took the ominous prophecy into mind that day. As Fireflight and her dead son's body were dragged out of the nursery, no one noticed the spectral figures comforting the young tabby kit, and no one realized what was really at stake when Toadkit was saved.

Chapter 1

Toadpaw opened her eyes and blinked against the sharp, green light filtering through the birch-and-pine canopy. She lifted her head and gazed around, her brow furrowed. She remained there for a few minutes, warm and dry in a bundle of utter confusion. Everything about this place seemed different, and she wasn't sure how she had gotten here. Eventually growing tired of just laying idly, she stood up cautiously and shook the scraps of bedding from her pelt. Not willing to leave the comfort of her mossy nest, Toadpaw began to lick the tangles from her fur.

As her tongue rasped over the small knots, Toadpaw remained alert, listening to the chirp of crickets sounding from the undergrowth a little ways away and scenting as much of the forest as she could.

Once her eyes had adjusted, Toadpaw took a reluctant step forward. The forest floor felt springy beneath her feet, and she kept moving, ignoring the pine needles sticking between her toes. The air almost seemed too cold for the green-leaf likeness the forest possessed.

Although this place seemed strange, Toadpaw began to feel oddly at home. It all felt similar to her; the wind passing through the uppermost branches, the earthy smells of overturned logs, and the gentle hum that the forest floor sent up her paws. As Toadpaw turned onto a well-worn rabbit trail, she continued to struggle with the thought.

The young she-cat let her instincts take over and tuned into her senses. She perked her ears to listen for any signs of life. The chatter of distant sparrows became clearer as the pines thinned out and more light filtered in to the forest floor. The spongy carpet of needles gave away to lush patches of grass. The rushing of a river could be heard in the distance, and Toadpaw realized with a jolt that she was nearing StreamClan territory. The river that served as

a border between StreamClan and FernClan was typically swift on its own, but with the added melt-water from the early Newleaf, it would be more furious than ever.

But when Toadpaw reached the river, her mind was not on the raging current, but the slender red tabby sitting beside it. Toadpaw crept back a few paw steps, letting herself be enveloped by a large holly bush. The sharp leaves pricked at her thin, brown pelt, and it took every ounce of strength she could muster to not wrestle out.

The red tabby turned, staring off into the trees, and for the first time, Toadpaw was able to get a glimpse of the she-cat's face. Her features were feminine, and her expression soft, as if she was searching for an old friend. Toadpaw's heart melted. She felt herself searching for the words to comfort the cat, and even took a step forward. That was where she made her mistake.

Toadpaw's foot landed on a sharp twig, which splintered under her weight. The wood pierced her tender paw pads, not yet calloused from warrior training. She let out a high-pitched yowl and launched herself into the air. She leaped straight up, not taking into account the thick tangle of spiny leaves that cracked and snapped at each movement she made. A group of nearby birds flew off, squawking indignantly.

The red tabby's eyes instantly darted to the holly bush, just in time to watch Toadpaw tumble out, spitting and cursing at her own stupidity. She wrestled her hind leg free from the branches and lay sprawled on the ground, the fur on her neck bristling in aggression.

The strange cat laughed quietly and padded towards Toadpaw, raw amusement gleaming in her eyes. Up close, the tabby seemed ageless and ethereal and looked as if she carried some sort of mystical aura about her. Toadpaw made an attempt to scamper back, but she tripped over her now-swolen paw, and just sat numbly, watching the other she-cat come to her.

"So this is the apprentice I'm supposed to teach," she meowed good-naturedly. Her voice rang with a bell-like quality, sending shivers down Toadpaw's spine.

Ignoring her past hostility, Toadpaw let her curiosity take over. "And what do you mean by that," she asked cautiously. "I already *have* a mentor."

"Your questions will all be answered in time," she said, dismissing the matter with a small toss of her head.

Toadpaw frowned, thrashing her tail against the thick river reeds that bordered the clearing by the river. "But for now, I will tell you something. I am Redstreak, and here," she meowed, gesturing all around her. "Here is where your destiny lies."

Toadpaw's jaw dropped. This she-cat, Redstreak, was a complete lizard-brain! Before she had a chance to stutter out a single word, Redstreak came even closer. She was powerless to either fight or flee with her injured paw, and could only brace herself as the she-cat touched her nose to Toadpaw's own.

The cold she had anticipated was nothing compared to the chill that radiated throughout her body. She felt as if she were being enveloped in an icy cocoon. After what seemed like moons of struggle, Toadpaw began to give in the intricate numbness wrapping itself around her brain. The blinding white light was soon replaced by a black void of nothingness.

Chapter 2

Toadpaw woke to the steady drip of rainwater pooling at her feet. She twitched her ear in annoyance and pulled her hind paws toward her chest, flicking her toes to rid them of the cold water.

Blinking slowly, she looked around. Only one cat was left in the den- Adderpaw. He was relieved of his duties last night after complaining of a bellyache.

Toadpaw rolled her eyes and stood, arching her back and yawning. All at once, the memories of last night hit her, and she stopped for a moment, trying to piece together a solid thought. She continued struggling as her paws carried her to the DeadTree. The clan was shrouded in a thick mist, which clung to her fur and weighed down her pelt. She knew for a fact that she wasn't the only one having trouble, and instantly regretted feeling sorry for herself as she watched Lichenstone shake condensation from his pelt.

The old deputy had a mass of long, unkempt fur that seemed almost impossible to manage, even more so in the sticky weather of the marsh.

Toadpaw padded over to join her mentor, Wrentail. The two shared a friendly glance as Mothstar began to dish out patrols to the gathering cats.

"Lichenstone, Oakfur, and Mossbelly," she called out into the shroud of fog. "You will take the NorthClan border, but be careful; the rocks will be slippery, and the gorge is as dangerous as ever."

The deep ravine separating NorthClan and FernClan was never *not* dangerous, and even the youngest kits knew that cats from either side wouldn't dare leap across the border. The jump was easy to make, but the consequences of missing were enough to tame most disputes.

"Fawnspeckle, Dawnlight, and Cloudpelt," she added, searching with narrowed eyes. "You may take the first hunt, and bring Newtpaw with you."

The cats that were called out organized themselves quickly and set off, exiting through the thorn-covered exit and entrance.

"That means we get to battle-train," Wrentail meowed, nudging her apprentice excitedly. Toadpaw purred, amused by the older cat's enthusiasm. They slid out of the exit gracefully and ran out into the thick, evergreen forest.

Wrentail led Toadpaw to one of the muddier clearings that they used for practice. "It's the perfect weather to practice stalking," she said, testing the muddy ground with her paw. It sunk a bit, but seemed to hold her weight.

"NorthClan cats are bigger than us," she began, stepping out into the marshy ground. "They grow fat on the squirrels that run through their forests and the fish that run through their rivers. If you are to win any battle against a NorthClan cat, then you must first outsmart them."

Wrentail crouched down, pressing her belly fur to the muddy earth. Her tabby pelt blended seamlessly with the dark background, and Toadpaw didn't think she would have been able to pick her out had it not been for the fact that she had seen her start.

As her mentor demonstrated, Toadpaw let her mind linger to last night's dream. The words of Redstreak echoed in her mind. The batty she-cat seemed so absurd, but the sincerity in the way that she spoke made Toadpaw second guess her decision.

"Are you focusing?" Wrentail asked, flicking her ears in annoyance. She had already gone across, and was clearly not happy that she would have to demonstrate again. "Don't tell me you have a bellyache as well." She padded across the clearing to Toadpaw's side.

"We can't afford another epidemic," Wrentail fretted. Toadpaw hissed in agreement, her eyes clouding over at the memory. The

strong bout of fever had swept throughout the clan, killing off most of the kits and elders and quite a few warriors. Toadpaw herself had lost her father to the sickness, and Wrentail a sister.

Wrentail laid her tail on Toadpaw's shoulder comfortingly for a moment.

"Maybe we should just find some of those berries for Adderpaw," Toadpaw suggested, hoping that the search would give her time to sort through her dreams.

Wrentail simply nodded and headed off Eastwards, toward BoulderClan.

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The trek back from Wrentail and Toadpaw's search was quiet. Both she-cats carried small twigs covered in small blue berries, which forced them to keep their jaws shut.

Toadpaw could sense the disappointment radiating off of her mentor, as well as a distinct tinge of worry. Toadpaw usually did wonderful during battle training, and had a good record when it came to being focused.

Although she hadn't really been involved in the idle gossip of elders and queens, Toadpaw was sure she had heard of Redstreak before. The story of the red tabby's past was on the tip of her tongue, so clear she could taste it. Or maybe it was just the berries getting to her head...

"You should probably sleep," Wrentail meowed, grabbing the branch from her apprentice. The two young cats padded into camp together and parted ways without another word.

Toadpaw proceeded to drag herself into the apprentice den, her eyes drooping with the weight of Redstreak's words. Now that she thought about it, she was exhausted.

She plopped herself down next to Adderpaw, who still hadn't moved since the previous night. The raspy breaths coming out from under his bed of feathers unnerved her. His fur felt like fire and bristled at

her touch. He didn't move though, and only gave a whisper of complaint.

Toadpaw squeezed her eyes shut and forced herself to go rigid. Sleep came eventually, but it seemed like only a heartbeat before she was shrouded by a familiar, white light.

Toadpaw woke where the dream had left off: the clearing near the traitorous holly bush. She glared up defiantly, expecting to see Redstreak, but she was completely alone.

Only the familiar smell of the batty she-cat was left- and a faint smell at that. Toadpaw parted her jaws wide and picked up as much of the scent as she could before following the StreamClan border downriver. Eventually, she began to pick up sounds of a conversation, although it seemed to be more one-sided than a two-way chat.

The more frequent voice was high in pitch, hinting that the speaker was young, and most likely younger than Toadpaw herself. The other voice was, of course, Redstreak's; graceful, slow, and bell-like.

After following the sounds for a while, Toadpaw found herself at the sandy riverbanks that jutted into FernClan territory. The beach was technically owned by StreamClan, but that didn't stop Toadpaw's clanmates from using the warm rocks. To sooth their aching muscles.

Peering over the top of a smooth bolder, Toadpaw was able to get a glimpse of both Redstreak and an unfamiliar black she-cat. She was still kit-soft and much shorter than her companion.

The smaller of the two padded quickly after Redstreak, talking loudly about anything that came to mind. Although Redstreak's hunched shoulders and long strides made it seem like she didn't care, Toadpaw could see a faint smile on the older cat's face.

"When will I learn to cure Whitecough?" she prodded. "Ooh! And what about Greencough? Blackcough!?" Toadpaw was surprised that the little cat hadn't burst yet, with all the energy she was carrying.

"In time, Darkpaw," Redstreak sighed. Toadpaw tilted her head.

What do they mean by Whitecough*?* Toadpaw wondered. It had never dawned on her that the deadly diseases were given names by the other clans. She only knew them as fatal coughs that came every Leafbare, taking lives slowly and painfully. As far as she knew, the coughs had no cure, and typically escalated to a point of no return.

Toadpaw shrugged it off and turned her attention back to the two she cats, who were making their way down the beach. Not wanting to lose sight of them, she dove for the cover of the rocks and grasses only a little ways away from Darkpaw and Redstreak's path.

"For now," Redstreak said, after a moment of silence. "We will learn the *names* of the different herbs." Darkpaw's eyes widened with excitement and her strides quickened, causing sand to fly out from under her paws.

"You may join us too, if you'd like," Redstreak meowed over her shoulder, not even pausing to meet Toadpaw's shocked gaze. Darkpaw spun around to watch the older apprentice stalk out of the undergrowth, both excitement and confusion showing in the way she examined her new companion.

Toadpaw joined Redstreak at the front of the growing gang. Without missing a beat, Darkpaw barreled up next to Toadpaw, waving her tail in a friendly manner. The gesture was not returned.

"I'm Darkpaw," she mewed cheerfully.

"I know," Toadpaw grumbled back, still angry at both Redstreak and herself for getting caught. The obnoxious apprentice by her side wasn't helping her mood either.

"Oh." Darkpaw waited for a minute, waiting for Toadpaw to introduce herself, obviously growing impatient with each passing minute.

"That's Toadpaw," Redstreak said, butting into the conversation. "She'll be training alongside you, Cragpaw, and Foxpaw." Toadpaw

growled some unintelligible curses under her breath that she had heard Cedarbranch using on Newtpaw once.

"You're big for an apprentice!" Darkpaw squeaked, panting at the effort of running on the hot sand.

"And you're puny for a kit," Toadpaw retorted. She was growing tired of restraining the urge to lash out at Darkpaw, and was only held back by her fear of Redstreak.

"Come on," Redstreak called. She had gotten far ahead and was now standing in front of a prickly bush, covered in bluish-purple berries.

"Hey! Those are the berries we use when Adderpaw gets bellyaches," Toadpaw said. She momentarily forgot her grumpiness and bounded over to the bush.

"Well, then you have the right idea," Redstreak purred. "These are juniper berries. They cure bellyaches, help breathing, and have a calming effect."

Juniper berries; bellyaches, breathing, calming, Toadpaw thought, still muttering it to herself as they continued on.

They continued along the river, far past the beach, naming herbs as they came upon them. Darkpaw seemed to already know most of the names, but Toadpaw had a knack for remembering them. For the first time, she was actually enjoying herself here in the strange forest. But she still didn't understand how this could possibly be her 'destiny'. Learning the names of a few herbs couldn't possibly interfere with her life back in FernClan.... Right?